

Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25

1. Assessment of performance

1.0 Introduction

1.0.1 Higher Education at Strode College

This assessment of performance sets HE provision at Strode College in context and outlines the policies and practices that have a direct impact on the student learning experience. Whilst focusing on the situation of underrepresented groups, it considers how all students are treated equally and evidences the College's promotion of effective access, success and progression through diverse statistical information.

Strode College has delivered Higher Education courses since 2007 in partnership with the University of Plymouth and with Pearson since 2012 and over this period has made a very valuable contribution to the local community. There is currently no university in Somerset with all HE provision being offered by Further Education colleges; the top quality, higher-level study opportunities at Strode College are therefore of particular importance to the area. Within this regional context, Strode College has actively pursued the strategic objective to expand its HE offer and to present an appropriately wide choice to prospective students. Approval to deliver the popular and extremely successful BA (Hons) History, Heritage & Archaeology (HHA) degree top-up course has been complemented by the addition of new Foundation Degrees in Management (Business + Public Sector), Psychology and English with Creative Writing. Consultations with students also led to FdSc E-Business Technologies being replaced by HND Computing, which now attracts increased student numbers through an up-to-date and practical curriculum.

The fundamental principle of Higher Education at Strode College has always been to deliver the best possible courses and to give students from all backgrounds a first-class experience. In 2017, the high quality of provision was officially recognised by both a TEF Silver Award (i/ii) and a successful Quality Review Visit conducted by QAA (iii/iv):

- i. *High levels of student engagement encourage active commitment to learning and study*
- ii. *Course design provides diverse opportunities for students to deepen and extend understanding*
- iii. *The student experience is reviewed through data analysis, programme monitoring and effective action plans*
- iv. *The College is good at receiving feedback from students and is responsive to their views*

1.0.2 Statistical divergence

The statistical information used as a basis for this assessment of performance comes from a variety of local, regional and national sources. Each is valid and instructive in its own right and can help to analyse the experience of students on our programmes; however, the very nature of our provision as a small, yet growing contribution to the HE landscape inevitably leads to a fluctuating and in some instances misleading view. Not only does the context of data from different sources vary enormously, as outlined below, but the size of the HE cohort at Strode College and its subsequent division into specific groups means that figures arrived at can sometimes appear to be contradictory. This appraisal of our achievements and the areas, in which we have targets to attain, is nonetheless a genuine, sincere and robust attempt to recount the position as it stands and to show ambition for strategic development throughout the student lifecycle for the full duration of this Access and Participation Plan (APP).

Small class sizes and individualised attention are two aspects of Higher Education study at Strode College that we promote as benefitting our learners and are features of our programmes that frequently receive positive comments in student voice. Given the average size of teaching groups, it is nonetheless inevitable that the issue of statistical unreliability will have an impact upon the assessment of our HE programmes. This factor is summed up by 'NSF Consulting', an international market research company providing specialist services to government agencies to monitor the effectiveness of funding policy and to review performance. In its official documentation, NSF acknowledges that particular care should be taken in making judgements on statistics from small survey samples by stating:

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“It is not unreasonable for funding bodies of government programmes to want hard evidence to justify expenditure or make decisions on future spending. Data is a powerful tool in making such assessments; however, it is important to know where limitations lie. From recent market research and evaluation studies, a number of problems have been highlighted in the use of statistics, including reading significance into minor discrepancies in small sample sizes. When seeing differences across groups or sub-groups, there is a skill in isolating and explaining whether percentage findings are large enough to be meaningful. Small sample sizes can be misleading and drawing accurate conclusions requires caution.”

1.0.3 Data sources

The OfS Access and Participation Dataset: At regional conferences, OfS statisticians confirmed that a cohort size of 15-20 students was used to ensure the accuracy and validity of figures for both subject disciplines and sub-groups of underrepresented students. The result of this understandable basis for statistical analysis was that Strode College data appeared on a very small number of pages of the spreadsheet release and just a handful of comparative graphs on the OfS dashboard. The messages contained therein have been built into this assessment, even though in several cases the outcome is incomplete or rather spikey, whilst a wide selection of other data sources was also consulted.

Strode College Management Data: With Further Education courses accounting for the large majority of provision at the College, the data available to managers and the means of questioning it have been functionally developed to meet the expectations of FE. With the growth of Higher Education at Strode in recent years, adaptations to data systems have been implemented to take reporting in the direction required by HE; this began as a pre-cursor to our successful QRV and has been extended with the introduction of the new regulatory regime. Further refinement of its content and manipulability will be needed to facilitate monitoring of APP targets with the differences between end-of-course data and in-year calculations being one current misalignment with other sources.

University of Plymouth Dashboards: Offering valuable comparisons with providers across a large academic network, this data set forms the basis of quality assurance between the College and its validating partner; however, it only deals with University of Plymouth students and not the substantial element of our cohort on Pearson HNC/HNDs.

TEF Y4: Core Metrics

	Denominator	Indicator (a) %	Benchmark (b) %	Difference (a)-(b)	Z-score	Flag	Year†		
							1	2	3
The teaching on my course	64	89.5	88.1	1.3	0.4				
Assessment and feedback	64	86.3	80.9	5.4	1.2				
Academic support	64	89.6	86.2	3.4	0.9				
Continuation	123	79.7	85.7	-6.0	-2.1	-			
Employment or further study	74	93.2	92.3	0.9	0.4			+	
Highly skilled employ/study	74	74.3	69.5	4.9	1.2				

Strode College gained a Silver Award in TEF Y2, but has improved its performance against various metrics since:

- ‘The teaching on my course’ was 15% below benchmark in 2014; yet by TEF Y4, it stood at 89.5% and was above.
- ‘Assessment and feedback’ is 5.4% above TEF Y4 benchmark, whilst ‘Academic support’ stands at 89.6%, having risen from 74.7%; both indicators have green asterisked flags indicating they are in the top 10% of the cohort.
- Whilst TEF Y4 NSS-related metrics were particularly strong, reflecting the 96.15% overall student satisfaction in that survey, continuation remains a challenge at 6% below benchmark and with a negative flag.¹
- Statistical unreliability can be seen under ‘employment or further study’, which has fluctuated over recent years; but TEF Y4 showed both this and ‘highly skilled employment/further study’ in advance of the sector benchmark.
- Information from splits about particular underrepresented groups can be found under specific headings below.

Additional sources: Somerset Intelligence / Somerset Annual Equities Report 2017 / Office for National Statistics / HESA data analysis / The Guardian datablog / Rural England / The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)

¹ Target: To reduce non-continuation rates for underrepresented groups (LPN + Mature) PTS_1/ PTS_3: specialised support activities;

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1.0.4 Demographics and gender

Before addressing each student group in isolation, and accepting the statistical challenge that small cohorts and multiple data sources represent, it is useful to gain an impression of the context in which Strode HE operates. First and foremost, the College provides Higher Education opportunities to local people; over the past four years, there have only been 20 instances of students with postcodes outside the county of Somerset enrolling on HE courses at Strode College and some of these have had secondary residences in the local area. Even the significant quota of citizens from other EU countries that have joined our programmes in recent years, have in the large majority of cases already been resident in Somerset before deciding to take on studies at Strode. This gives an accurate picture of the population pool, on which the College depends for its HE students, especially compared to the large majority of universities, who draw applications from across the UK and internationally.

Population estimates for the county of Somerset were published in June 2018 and indicated that the total figure had risen to 555,195, of which 323,517 were of working age (16-65). The numbers for Mendip, where Strode College is situated, were 113,513 and 67,282 respectively. From this target population, overall enrolments are shown below:

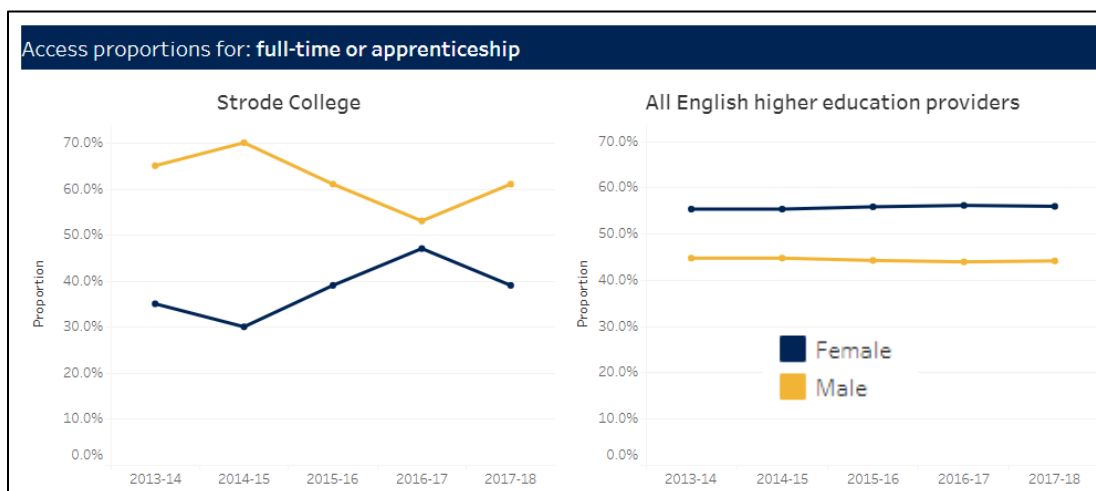
	FTE
2014-15	65
2015-16	81
2016-17	97
2017-18	107
2018-19	128

There has been a 96.9% increase in HE student numbers at Strode College between 2014-15 + 2018-19 with a similar expansion in the range and appropriateness of programme choice.

Within these significant growth figures, interesting developments can be identified regarding the gender balance of HE students at the College. Strode figures demonstrate a noticeable move within the overall increase in student numbers towards a position of equitability between male and female learners. This overshadows, however, some more subtle developments in the gender profile amongst HE students.

University of Plymouth statistics, looking at degrees and foundation degrees only, articulate a slightly greater number of females at the beginning of this process with 37.5% in 2014-15 and a proportionately stronger rise to a majority 59.2% in 2017-18. This has been driven largely by the introduction of the FdSc Psychology programme, which in 2017-18 was 84.2% female. Interestingly, the data from these sources runs counter to that on the OfS dashboard, which shows Strode College as having always had a surfeit of males, often significantly so, in contrast to the national picture in HE.

Strode data	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Male	64.7%	58.2%	51.5%
Female	35.3%	41.8%	48.5%



Over this period, the College has also welcomed a number of HE students, who have self-identified as gender neutral or have transitioned in their time with us and their record of attainment and future progression has been very good.

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1.1 Higher education participation, household income or socio-economic status

1.1.1 Access

The Social Mobility Commission, which is a non-departmental public body advising the DfE on progress towards greater social equality, states the following: "*Social mobility is about an individual's ability to build a good life for themselves, regardless of their background. The more social mobility there is, the less someone's destination in life depends on where they start out. It is not just about the prospects of those at the bottom of society, but about fairness at every level; it is about whether your background holds you back. Social mobility is an issue for the majority.*"

In seeking to promote access to Higher Education for students from low income and socio-economic backgrounds, providers like Strode College are actively contributing to improving social mobility. This is particularly relevant in a county like Somerset, which contains one of the areas with the lowest social mobility in the UK. It is our ambition to support social mobility for all our students through the academic achievements of further study or by providing them with the individual confidence and industry-specific competences that will see them make progress in employment.

The government views Somerset as a "Higher Education Cold Spot" with concentrated areas of low participation and some of the least well-served wards in the country in terms of access to HE. The proportion of Somerset's school leavers going into Higher Education has traditionally been lower than that seen in many other areas of the UK. At a national level, student numbers in 2018 reached their highest level since £9,000+ tuition fees were introduced, but HE participation rates for Somerset continue to lag well behind. This represents a large quantity of school leavers not progressing in line with their qualifications and reflects the low wage, low aspiration nature of the region.

Unemployment in the county is relatively low; however, many local businesses struggle to recruit employees with the appropriate skills and experience. The percentage of people with Level 2-3 qualifications is comparable with the national average, but with only 34.6% of its economically active population aged 16-64 qualified to Level 4 and above, Somerset lies well below the UK norm. To secure future innovation and development within a business community consisting mainly of SMEs, the Somerset Growth Plan recognises the need to raise ambition towards accessing higher-level study amongst young people. In addition, whilst Somerset has a higher employment rate (78.5%) than the UK as a whole (72.6%), average earnings in Somerset are consistently lower than the overall national level. The 'Somerset Annual Equalities Report 2017' shows that levels of deprivation are generally below the UK average; however, it notes that there has been a sizeable increase in the number of 'highly deprived' neighbourhoods in the county in recent years from 14 at the time of IMD 2010 to 25 in IMD 2015. This means that in 2015 around 38,000 Somerset residents lived in a neighbourhood identified as one of the 20% most deprived in England.

The map on the following page shows the areas of relative deprivation and affluence in Somerset as ranked by IMD. In a development from previous versions of the POLAR indicators, the more recent POLAR 4 analysis focuses its interpretation more specifically on the closely related issue for low participation in Higher Education. Using POLAR 4 information and relating it to the specific 7-digit postcodes of individual students shows that over the past four years the greatest percentage of students from areas with low participation in Higher Education accessing courses at Strode College is to be found coming from the Somerset towns closest to the College²:

Town / Postcode	% resident in POLAR 4 Q1-2	% resident in POLAR 4 Q1	distance to Strode College
Street (BA16)	100%	86%	<3m
Shepton Mallet (BA4)		73%	11m
Yeovil (BA21)	100%	80%	17m
Frome (BA11)		100%	23m

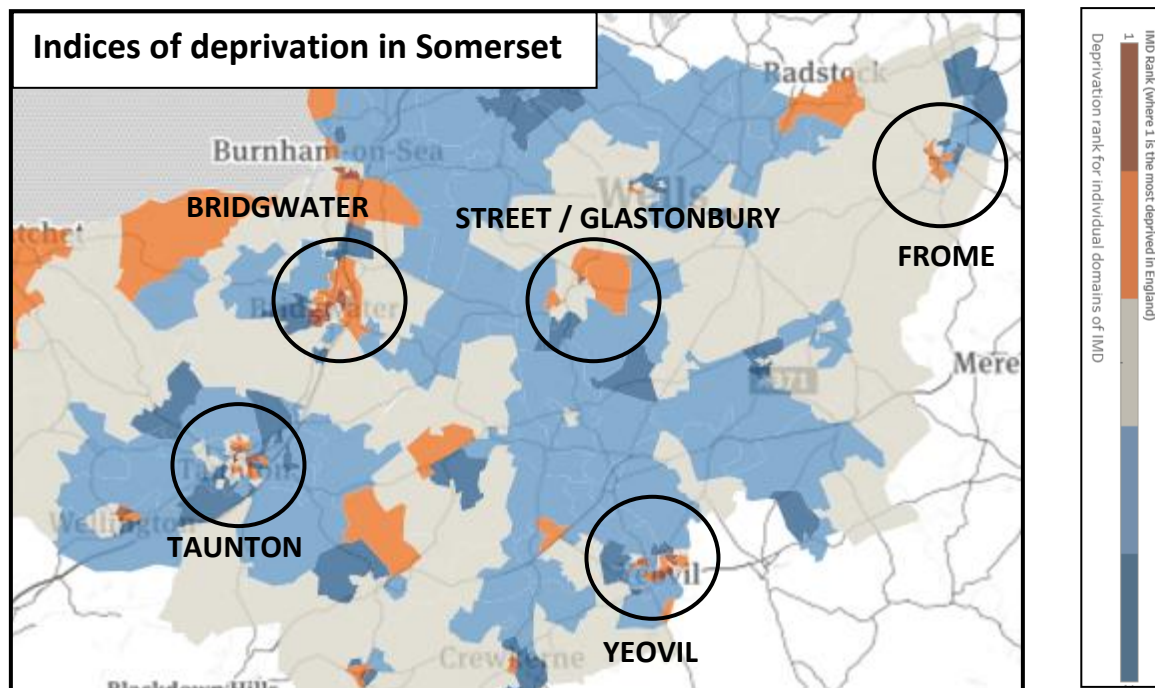
Whilst the numbers joining Strode programmes are lower from Yeovil and Frome, due to alternative HE provision being available at both Yeovil College and Wiltshire College (Trowbridge) respectively, the opportunity given to prospective students from homes with little family tradition of HE is demonstrable. There is also a noticeable difference when considering applicants from the vicinity of either Bridgwater or Taunton. The numbers accessing Strode courses from the

² Target: To reduce the gap in participation for students from underrepresented groups (LPN) PTA_1: recruitment activity in towns closest to the College to increase the proportion of students from low-participation neighbourhoods;

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more disadvantaged centres of these towns has been very small with by far the greater quota coming from the surrounding, more affluent suburbs.

An obvious conclusion from these figures would be that students encouraged to access Higher Education from homes where social mobility is less commonplace, often look towards cost-effective solutions within reasonable travel distance. For exactly the same reasons, it is likely that most prospective students from the POLAR 4 Q1-2 areas along the M5 corridor would look to HE study choices offered by University Centre Somerset at Bridgwater & Taunton College, whilst those with private transport options are more able to select the precise programmes they wish to embark on within their local area. The spread of applications from POLAR 4 quintiles reflects this; from 2015-16 to 2018-19 almost 26% of students enrolling on Strode HE courses came from each of Q1, Q3 + Q4 with only 11% being resident in Q2 + Q5 areas.



Compared to the country as a whole, Somerset is a predominantly rural county with about 48% of the population classified as living in a 'rural' environment and 52% as 'urban'. This distribution is particularly seen in education with Somerset having one of the highest ratios of rural to urban schools of any local authority area in England with many receiving additional 'sparsity' funding to support their viability. 'Rural England' has collated national data confirming that rurality presents a number of important issues, such as social isolation and vulnerability to shrinking public sector budgets, which impact disproportionately on young people and the very old. Qualitative research undertaken by the organisation in areas with poor transport infrastructure and lower than average wages, such as Somerset, has shown that these combined factors reduce aspiration and inhibit the uptake of higher-level study.

Socio-economic status	%
Intermediate occupations	1.23%
Lower managerial and professional occupations	2.47%
Not classified	3.70%
Unknown	92.59%
Total	100%

University of Plymouth data for 2016-17 described socio-economic status at Strode as shown here. These statistics are problematic, however, as no specific socio-economic status is recorded for the vast majority of students.³

Currently only minimal data exists to help identify the students of low socio-economic status and figures that are available vary quite considerably from year to year. The clear suggestion is, however, that Strode College, as an example of localised HE provision within a further education context, has a far greater proportion of students from deprived backgrounds than most universities and so has a valuable contribution to make in terms of closing the national gap between the lowest and

³ Target: To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from underrepresented groups (socio-economic backgrounds) PTA_2 and to improve the collation of data to identify trends within this group more easily;

highest POLAR 4 quintiles. Numbers may be small, but the existence of such provision and encouragement of its growth undoubtedly helps to redress the balance.

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1.1.2 Success + Continuation

The following table has been constructed using information available for 2016-17 and 2017-18 with regard to the performance of students on Higher Education courses at Strode College. Data has deliberately been drilled down to the level of individual students with the same warnings applying regarding statistics in small cohorts. Details for 'success' and the proportion of distinctions or first class degrees correspond to those learners completing a course in that particular year, whilst 'continuation' data shows the percentage of students moving from the first into the second year of a two-year programme. In each case all students enrolling on the course at the beginning of the period of study are included in calculations. Those claiming bursaries have been counted under 'low income' and in most instances will have successfully obtained the maximum maintenance loan or grant. Mature students are those aged 21 and over at the start of the course, whilst 'disabled' learners will have declared a specific disability or learning difficulty at enrolment. Comments on the findings of this investigation have been related to each sub-category featured in this APP later in the document.

Degrees + Foundation Degrees University of Plymouth		%			low income		mature		disabled	
		success	+ Dist/1st	continuation	success	continuation	success	continuation	success	continuation
BA (Hons) History, Heritage & Archaeology	2016-17	64%	27.3%		71.4%		55.5%		66.6%	
	2017-18	100%	30%		100%		100%		100%	
FdA History, Heritage & Archaeology	2016-17	91.6%	33.3%	76.9%	100%	85.7%	100%	75%	100%	n/a
	2017-18	100%	41.6%	73.3%	100%	100%	100%	71.4%	100%	n/a
FdA Management	2016-17	100%	20%	50%	100%	80%	100%	50%	100%	66.6%
	2017-18	50%	16.6%	100%	50%	100%	100%	100%	33.3%	n/a
FdSc Psychology	2016-17			57.1%		85.7%		70%		50%
	2017-18	83.3%	33.3%	53.8%	75%	66.6%	75%	50%	100%	50%
<hr/>										
HND Pearson		%			no. low income		no. mature		no. disabled	
		success	+ Dist/1st	continuation	success	continuation	success	continuation	success	continuation
HND Computing*	2016-17	100%	88.8%	83.3%	100%	100%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	2017-18	100%	40%	81.8%	100%	100%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
HND Engineering	2016-17									
	2017-18			87.5%		100%		n/a		n/a

* combination of programme titles + QCF/RQF

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Whilst percentages often hide the precise number of students achieving in each category, the extent, to which local, low-cost higher education provision can offer attractive study opportunities to learners from low income households, remains clear. On the History, Heritage & Archaeology and Computing programmes, the proportion of learners from disadvantaged financial circumstances is particularly high; whilst the large majority have achieved their study aims, this has however, not been true for all⁴. Improvements in continuation for FdA Management applied equally to learners from low income backgrounds, but so proportionately did the decline in successful outcomes. There were a relatively high number of students from low income households on the first years of the FdSc Psychology programme and this was reflected in the disappointingly low continuation figure.⁵

1.1.3 Progression to employment or further study

The most effective form of progression information available to us for all categories of student has been the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey that has previously been undertaken six months after the completion of Higher Education programmes. Given the size of the cohort, about which Strode College was required to find details of employment and further study subsequent to graduation, it was always within our capacity and capability to conduct the survey ourselves. A positive relationship with our students always led to a welcoming and fulsome response and enabled us to exceed regulatory expectations with each year well over 80% of all listed students providing information.

Whilst understanding the imperative to move all such records to Graduate Outcomes and appreciating the reasons for extending the date, at which former students are questioned post-graduation, this change has not assisted our own assessment of progression. At the point of our APP submission, we are still awaiting Cohort D of the Graduate Outcomes process to gain an impression of the life experiences of our 2018 leavers and therefore the information cited here and for other target student groups is only representative of the period 2015-2017, for which we have reliable DLHE data.

Waiting a considerable time to have information on the destination of our graduates, as used to be provided by DLHE, has led us to the conclusion that we will seek in a time period commensurate with the APP to develop our own alumni practices and supplement the details on progression obtained through Graduate Outcomes with our own contacts.

From the data available currently, details will be highlighted in respect of each of the underrepresented groups required to feature in the APP, commencing here with information related to those from lower participation neighbourhoods, as well as those from low income households and socio-economic backgrounds. Documentary records will not be supplied as part of this submission process as the DLHE survey contains sensitive, personal information about named individuals.

The total cohort of students responding to the Strode College DLHE survey across these two academic years numbers just 59, yet within this context we were shown to have a particularly high proportion of leavers progressing on to higher level employment or further study with the number in professional managerial jobs being >10% above the sector average. TEF Y4 split metrics also show that 86.7% of students from POLAR 4 Q1-2 neighbourhoods went on to higher level study or employment.

Of the 59 students across the two years, 27 (45.8%) received a bursary of £300 to assist with financial hardship and facilitate access to Higher Education. In many cases this will have been based on the student in question having successfully applied for the maximum maintenance grant/loan as a result of reduced family income. Amongst these graduates, at the time of the survey 23 had gone on to further study at a higher level, including several Masters' programmes at prestigious universities such as Exeter, Cardiff and Royal Holloway, whilst others had progressed to well paid jobs in professions linked to their chosen field of study, such as software engineers, archivists and teachers.

In order to support graduate progression into employment, Strode College believes that interaction with business is a crucial part of any Higher Education programme. Employer engagement makes study economically relevant, increases graduate awareness of the world of work and supports the development of personal and professional skills that are a necessity in the modern workplace.

⁴ Target: To reduce the attainment gap for students from underrepresented groups and improve percentage attainment rates for students from low income backgrounds PTS_2;

⁵ Target: To reduce non-continuation rates for underrepresented groups (LPN + Mature) PTS_1/ PTS_3: specialised support activities;

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The process of employer engagement is aided by the regular contact that the College has with many local and national companies, as well as with regional business associations, such as Somerset Chamber of Commerce and the South West Business Council. Careers guidance is also embedded into Professional Practice modules and assignment tasks on various courses have been related specifically to partnerships with industry.

Work-related learning is a crucial element of Strode HE courses, occurring through direct engagement with a workplace environment and the use of real working examples in the classroom. This includes contact with business through invited speakers or visits to companies and all initiatives enable students to meet relevant programme learning outcomes. The TEF Statement of Findings concluded that: *“work-based learning is integral to curriculum delivery, involves regular contact with employers and is supported by careers guidance embedded into professional practice modules.”*

Students are encouraged to improve their employment prospects by using the diverse employability strategies offered by the University of Plymouth and also by participating in an HE Employability Day organised in conjunction with the National Careers Service. Strode modules equally seek to develop entrepreneurial skills amongst HE students in case their decision upon graduation is to realise their business ideas and set up their own company.

Whether positive progression for students on Strode HE programmes is completion of a degree, advancement to higher level study or pursuing an active and fulfilling career, it is the College’s strategic aim to facilitate these ambitions through our provision to the greatest possible degree. Ensuring that these opportunities exist to the fullest extent for students of all backgrounds is inherent to our Higher Education philosophy.

1.2 Black, Asian and minority ethnic students

1.2.1 Access

Information provided by the ‘Office for National Statistics’ from the last official census in 2011 shows that the majority ethnic group in England and Wales was ‘White’ at 48.2 million or 86% of the population. Within this ethnicity, the largest group was categorised as ‘White British’ with 45.1 million or 80.5%. The census also evidenced that the greatest concentration of individuals belonging to other minority ethnic groups was to be found in urban areas of the country and that the south west was one of the regions with the least diverse populations.

At the time of the last Census, there were 28,414 people resident in Somerset, whose ethnicity was not ‘White British’, equating to 5.4% of the county’s overall population. In this context, ‘White Other’ relates to people who are White and yet not ‘British’, ‘Irish’ or ‘Gypsy or Irish Traveller’ and was the second largest ethnic group representing 2.8% of the population at the time. Many residents, who are citizens of other EU countries, fell into this category and Polish was identified as the most common ‘non-UK’ ethnicity in all Somerset’s districts, accounting for 1% of the overall population with that figure set to rise dramatically over subsequent years. The table below shows the percentage of ‘White British’ residents living in each district of Somerset in 2017, compared to the county total and England as a whole:

Ethnic Group	England	Somerset	Mendip	Sedgemoor	South Somerset	Taunton Deane	West Somerset
White: British	79.8%	94.6%	94.2%	95.3%	95.0%	93.5%	95.8%

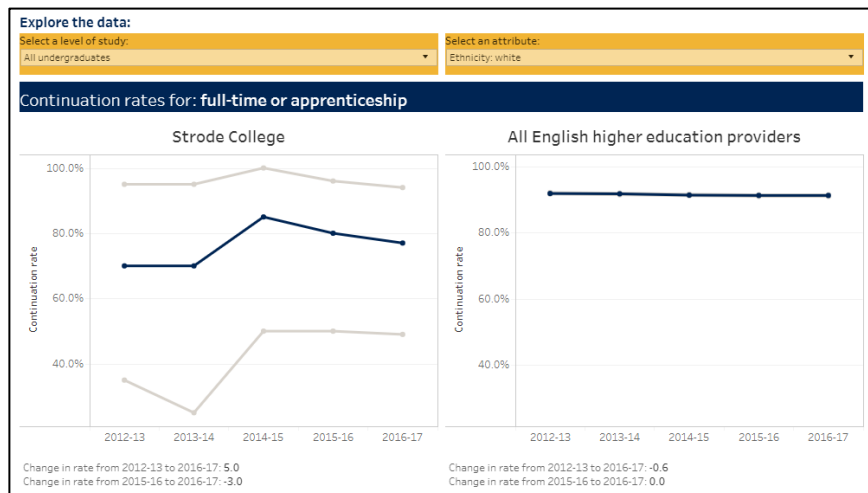
According to the local authority, 10.6% of pupils attending state-funded schools in Somerset in January 2018 were of a minority ethnic group (i.e. with a reported ethnicity other than ‘White British’). The second largest ethnic group was ‘White Other’, including ‘White European’ students and accounting for 5.0% of the school population. Mixed ethnicity pupils were 2.5% of the population; Asian pupils 0.6%; Black pupils 0.2%; and Chinese pupils 0.2%.

Against this background, figures for non-White Higher Education students, as presented in Strode College data, indicate very few BAME students with certain cohorts in recent years having none at all. University of Plymouth data, which is currently calculated at a different point in the annual cycle, shows 98.8% of Strode HE students were ‘White’ in 2017-18.

Whilst in a local context for the south west, recruitment of ethnic minorities to Strode College’s HE provision stands some comparison, more could clearly be achieved to bring this category in line with national expectations⁶.

1.2.2 Success + Continuation

Black, Asian and minority ethnic students are not referred to on the table on page 6 due to the extremely small numbers outlined above. The high proportion of ‘White’ students does, however, allow for one of the very few OfS dashboard graphics applicable to Strode College to illuminate the non-continuation issue in the particular context of ethnicity.



Whilst the grey lines show the statistical deviance, within which the outcomes need to be interpreted, emphasising once again the unreliability of minimal data, the diagram demonstrates that the continuation rates amongst the large majority of our students are at best in line with national norms or, more often, fall substantially behind other providers, as TEF metrics confirm.⁷

In terms of the success of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in the county as a whole, the ‘Somerset Intelligence’ website points out that the attainment of minority ethnic groups in the county is considerably below the local authority average across all stages of education. The initial challenge would therefore be encouraging improved achievement and bringing them into HE; however of the small number, who have progressed on to Strode HE courses to date, there are nonetheless examples of students outperforming expectations based on previous academic records and proceeding to good jobs. Such outcomes perhaps explain why Strode College was awarded TEF Silver, for which the Statement of Findings highlighted how learners from all backgrounds are expertly guided by HE staff towards success in their studies:

“The College culture encourages the development of teaching excellence and offers high quality continuous professional development opportunities to staff. The highly valued purpose-built Higher Education area provides flexible teaching spaces, access to computing and study space supporting group learning.”

1.2.3 Progression to employment or further study

See the context of the DLHE survey and progression statistics in 1.1.3 above.

Given the low number of students from minority ethnic backgrounds on Strode courses, particularly during the 2015-17 period covered by the available DLHE survey results, it is not surprising to find that only extremely few respondents came under this category. Nonetheless, employment progression for this group was distinctly positive.

1.3 Mature students

1.3.1 Access

Labour market information provided by the ‘Office for National Statistics’ (ONS) shows that people aged 50 or over are much less likely than the general population to hold a formal qualification and that in Somerset 66% of working age people with no qualification are aged 50 or over. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education also confirms that the older people are, the less inclined they are to engage in learning. 70% of 20-24 year olds undertake some form of education, training or study, compared with <40% of the working age population overall, and 16% of those aged 65-74.

⁶ Target: To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from underrepresented groups (ethnic minority/BAME) PTA_4;

⁷ Target: To reduce non-continuation rates for underrepresented groups: PTS_1/ PTS_3 specialised support activities;

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Whilst ‘mature students’ in the context of the APP refers to anyone aged 21 and over, the above statistics give a context to the achievements Strode College has made in attracting students of all ages on to its HE programmes. We have many students in their twenties, who have taken a relatively short break from formal education, but even more learners in the midst of adult life, who for changing personal circumstances or career ambitions have decided to improve or update their qualifications. The significant number of students in this category is actively contributing to closing the gaps in the educational profile of society outlined by ONS and NIACE. We then support the oldest sectors of the community with the chance to continue learning or pursue lifelong interests.

University of Plymouth data shows that a 50-50 split in 2014-15 between those below and above the age of 21 on degree or foundation degree courses had evolved to a position where 64.2% of the student body were classed as mature in 2017-18. The figure for 2016-17, which shows 63% mature students on UoP-validated programmes at Strode, breaks this down into more defined age groups as follows:

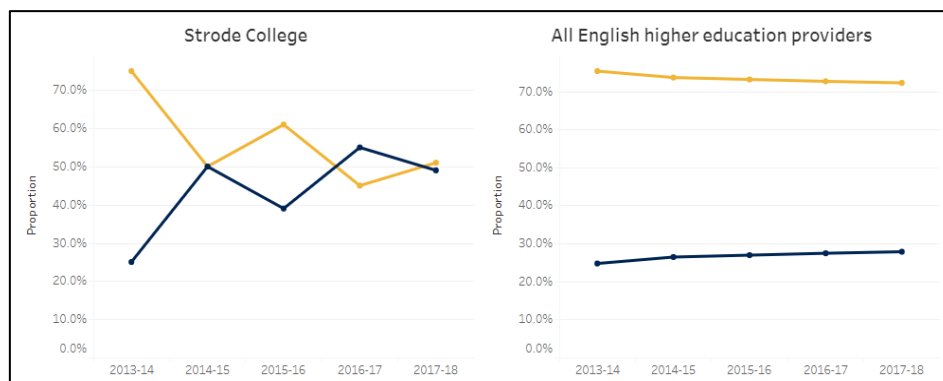
U 21: 37%	21-24: 13.6%	25-29: 7.4%	30+: 42%
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Strode College statistics, including courses delivered with Pearson, once again give an alternative perspective.

	Under 21	21+
2015-16	35.3%	64.7%
2018-19	47.3%	52.7%

OfS data for ‘Under 21’ (yellow) and ‘21+’ (blue) differs marginally from these sets of figures, but one thing is clear from all three sources: Strode College caters far more for the mature element of the student population than the university sector as a whole and so provides an important local opportunity for lifelong learning.

In terms of the Somerset population as the primary source of HE enrolments at Strode, it is important to note that the last census showed 61.1% of local residents were of working age (16-64) with the relative size of the working age population being below the national average in all districts.



Nationally, the number of mature students accessing HE has been in decline; this has, however, not been an issue for Strode College, where figures have not only held up, but continue to increase. This has been in part due to the introduction of FdSc Psychology, which has proved especially attractive to those in the community seeking to return to education, in the same way as had already been seen with FdA History, Heritage and Archaeology.

There is nonetheless a noticeable difference in recruitment trends for HE courses at Strode with the proportion of mature students being lower on the HND programmes. In terms of our strategic ambitions for Higher Education moving forward, we would seek to increase the relevance and attractiveness of HND Computing and Engineering for students other than those progressing internally from Level 3 BTEC courses, whilst at the same time encouraging more A Level students of History and Psychology to consider our in-house HE provision.

Finally, the 2017 QRV report identified a characteristic of HE provision at the College, which has a profound influence on the capacity of courses to attract mature students, stating that: *‘The College delivers each programme over two consecutive days of the week. This approach is popular among the students as it offers a flexible balance between College and home life.’* This scheduling can be very helpful, when adults persuaded to join these particular classes have personal or medical issues or come from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.

1.3.2 Success + Continuation *Please refer to the table on page 6*

The most noticeable aspect of the success and continuation data for mature students on UoP courses at Strode College in 2016-17 and 2017-18 is that there are often learners, who for one reason or another do not progress into the second year of foundation degree programmes⁸. Each individual case is different, but as a generalisation it might be contested that this eventuality falls into one of two main causes:

- i. students returning to education after a period away from study and often with personal or family responsibilities find it more difficult than they had imagined to re-engage with higher-level learning
- ii. students opting to enroll on higher education programmes in their locality are more likely to have complex domestic arrangements, financial pressures and/or health issues

By contrast, if student satisfaction is a measure of success, students following the History, Heritage & Archaeology programme, which includes sizeable numbers of mature learners, responded to NSS recently in such a manner that all three TEF categories have been flagged in the top 10% of absolute performance nationally for this metric.

1.3.3 Progression to employment or further study

See context of DLHE survey and progression statistics in 1.1.3 above.

42.3% of DLHE respondents across the two years of record were over 21 years of age when they started the course with many being much older than that. Mature students were particularly well represented on the BA (Hons) History, Heritage and Archaeology course and several of them progressed to Masters' programmes at major universities in a range of related disciplines. In a combination of permanent roles and volunteering alongside their studies, our historians had become museum curators, archivists, tour guides and visitor assistants at heritage sites.

Mature learners on other courses had also been successful in acquiring valued positions as IT managers, event organisers and civil servants. Such outcomes have allowed a good number of our graduates to gain new and more fulfilling roles in their working lives or to progress and increase their incomes in their previous careers. Very few respondents belonging to this group were in less favourable positions in the January following their departure from Strode College. A high level of performance was also to be seen amongst mature HE students in the TEF Y4 split metrics with 97.1% securing employment or further study and 77.1% higher skilled employment or further study (compared to 89.7% and 71.8% respectively for under 21s).

1.4 Disabled students

1.4.1 Access

The ONS has established that disabled people are three times less likely to hold qualifications compared to non-disabled people and only half as many will achieve degrees. Strode HE makes an effective contribution towards closing this gap given that it offers a manageable and attractive study option to those in Somerset for whom longer distance travel or being away from family might cause problems. In 2017-18 almost a third of Strode HE students (31.8%) declared themselves as having a disability or learning difficulty compared to the previously recorded figure of 12.7% of the working age population within the county. Data in this area is again incomplete with University of Plymouth records giving no details on disability for approximately half the cohort. Very few Strode students declare themselves as having mental health issues, yet 63 requests for extenuating circumstances were submitted in 2017-18, many on the grounds of problems related to mental health.

Students with a learning difficulty and/or disability have been well-represented on our HE programmes in comparison to other colleges in the region. 27% of HE students at the College had a learning difficulty and/or disability in 2015-16, equating to an increase of almost 50% on two years previously, and this figure has grown further to 35% in 2017-18. This is set against an average for the south-west of 21%.

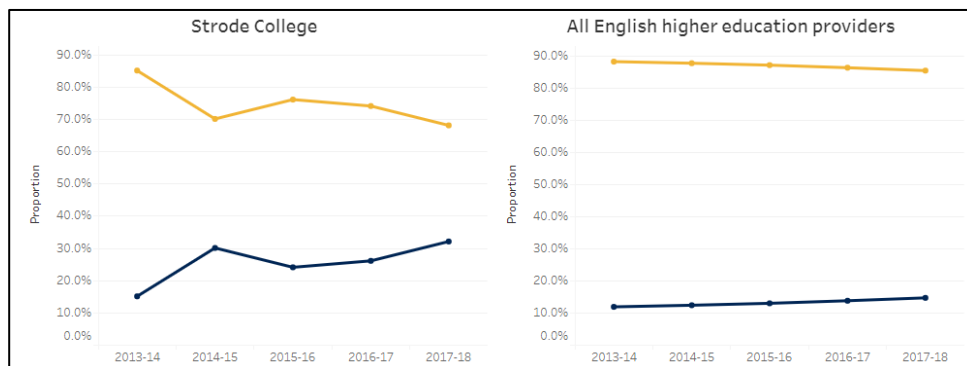
⁸ Target: To reduce non-continuation rates for underrepresented groups (LPN + Mature) PTS_1/ PTS_3: specialised support activities;

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The College’s close partnership work with local schools assists in this respect as it complements the existing provision for students in such circumstances. With the help of our specialist support team, several students have progressed through Level 3 courses at Strode and on to HE programmes. As Strode College almost exclusively recruits HE students from the south-west and students with a learning difficulty and/or disability disproportionately study Level 3 courses across our region, it is reasonable to conclude that we are successfully widening access to these groups of students.

HE learning environments at Strode College are safe and openly available to all, whilst we also try to ensure that resources are suitable to meet the needs of all students. The Higher Education and Skills Centre was purpose-built with both accessibility and sustainability in mind and includes flexible teaching rooms that can be adapted to the needs of different groups, as well as a fully-equipped area for quiet study and a spacious, comfortable common room. Lifts also provide ease of access to HE classrooms for the large proportion of our students, who face physical challenges.

Extensive consultation with HE students led to the design of the new facilities, which have been universally welcomed since their inception and described by learners as ‘outstanding’. HND Engineering students said, “With the new HE block, the facilities available have greatly improved, allowing us to work collaboratively and discuss assignments.” As all HE students are encouraged to increase their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thought, we are pleased to offer a learning environment that facilitates this requirement for all. The College believes strongly that showing respect to all our HE students in this way allows them to succeed as truly independent learners.



According to OfS data, Strode once again shows that locally-based HE can promote the interests of underrepresented groups and encourage them to engage in learning to a greater extent than other providers with a consistently narrower gap between disabled (blue) and non-disabled (yellow) students.

1.4.2 Success + Continuation Please refer to the table on page 6

Despite the relatively low numbers, on which conclusions are to be made, it would appear that, in similar way to mature learners, once initial difficulties or false expectations have been overcome, those students with disabilities and learning difficulties are suitably supported towards continuation on programmes and successful outcomes.

Strode College is proud of the diverse backgrounds, from which it derives its students, and facilitating broader access is central to our rationale for delivering HE. We support the wider community by offering opportunities to many people in the area, who would otherwise not proceed to higher-level study, including the increasing number of our students that enjoy success and progression on to further study and valuable employment despite enduring physical disabilities, learning difficulties or mental health issues.

Excellent student services provision, which has previously been commended by both QAA and Ofsted, assists learners with such challenges and enables them to engage with learning. From the many interventions made by the team with HE students, it is clear that effective support makes a visible contribution to outcomes. In addition, specially trained staff are available to help with finance or health matters and, as required, learners can also seek support from qualified counsellors. Policies for admissions, academic appeals, complaints, academic offences etc. have been revised to address all students equally and provide clarity.

The HE Student Charter, which sets out the expectations learners should have of the College as an HE provider, is also regularly reviewed by staff teams and HE students through discussion forums. The quality of support is further enhanced by the individual attention made possible through small group sizes, making for a student experience that is wholly inclusive, widely appreciated and encourages achievement.

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1.4.3 Progression to employment or further study

See context of DLHE survey and progression statistics in 1.1.3 above.

Of the 59 respondents to the 2015-17 Strobe DLHE surveys, 13 of them had declared disabilities registered at enrolment on the programme (22%). As with other categories of students, the outcomes recorded for those with disabilities were generally positive, despite there being relatively few examples of intersection with other disadvantages. Once again, the majority had gone on to further study – 69.2% of all disabled respondents – whilst others had secured higher-level employment as teachers and managers. Very few former students were working in less lucrative jobs with most of these being amongst the younger contingent of disabled learners to complete HE courses at Strobe over this period⁹.

It is also the College's objective that HE students of all backgrounds should acquire a sense of personal resilience to support their course achievement and improve their chances of positive progression. Specific tutorial sessions have therefore been developed to help learners cope with the pressures of HE study. This is of particular value to the substantial number of students choosing college-based HE due to lower self-confidence, health issues, family responsibilities, time in care or personal finances, any of which may have prevented them from leaving their home area to study at a larger university.

1.5 Care leavers

Based on 2016 data, just 45% of the 260 former care leavers in Somerset aged 19-21 years old were in education or employment, compared to a national average of 49%, whilst 52% were considered NEET against 40% nationally. In 2017 only 6% of care leavers in the county achieved GCSE standard passes in both English and Maths compared to 63% of their peers and 35% got no GCSE passes at all. Indeed, 71% of the cohort were considered to have some form of SEND with half of these attending a special school or pupil referral unit¹⁰.

In terms of tracking the progress of students from particular backgrounds into HE and employment, the College has been working closely with Somerset County Council on its Transition Panels. Schools and colleges from across the county share information about vulnerable students to help them into post-16 education and on to adult life. All support agencies are involved, including the Virtual School given the specific focus on care leavers.

Against these worrying statistics, it is perhaps none too surprising that the care leavers joining HE locally are few and far between; however with more being done locally to support greater access to higher-level study, there are some encouraging examples of success, including students who have progressed from L1 courses to complete HNC studies.

1.6 Intersections of disadvantage

Given the paucity of statistical information for individual student groups, knowledge about intersections of disadvantage is similarly lacking; however, below are just a few examples of interesting deductions to be made from existing data:

Mature + Disability: 2016-2019 See also above - difference in performance between younger and mature disabled students

Psychology: 80.7% mature, of which 42.9% have disability

History, Heritage & Archaeology: 77.1% mature, of which 33.3% have disability

Computing: 60.7% under 21 of which 32.2% have disability

Management: 72.7% under 21; 27.3% of total number of students have disability

According to the 'Somerset Intelligence' website, Ofsted maintains that the attainment gap between White children from low-income families and other White children is bigger than for any other ethnic group.

⁹ Target: To reduce the gap in progression to further study or employment for students from intersections of underrepresented groups (younger students with disabilities) PTP_1; individualised support and employability interventions

¹⁰ Target: To reduce the gap in participation in HE for students from underrepresented group (care leavers) PTA_3; working with local authority and the virtual school to support educational improvements for care leavers

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1.7 Other groups who experience barriers in higher education

1.7.1 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller'

'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' was only included as a distinct ethnic group on the most recent census with 733 people placing themselves in this category in Somerset or just 0.1% of the population. The group is, however, younger than the population overall with almost half aged under 25. In recent county school records, there were 259 children identified as Roma, Roma Gypsy or Traveller Irish heritage. Most of these young people were being educated at school or college, but some had started school late and some were receiving home schooling. Overall this group of students showed general underperformance due to a complex combination of factors, including financial deprivation, low levels of parental literacy and aspirations for their children's academic achievement, poor attendance and bullying. A small number identified Higher Education as a future ambition, but many felt they lacked the necessary advice and guidance.

2. Strategic aims and objectives

2.1 Equality and diversity

Strode College is committed to providing all HE students with high quality academic support based on mutual respect irrespective of age, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation. By promoting equality and fostering opportunities for everyone, we seek to ensure that equality and diversity are common aspects of student life. The College's approach to equality and diversity is central to our ambitions and interacts precisely with APP objectives:

"Strode College strives to be an inclusive learning environment, where students are able to pursue their interests and realise their aspirations. Students know that their needs and well-being are supported and that everyone will be treated with respect and dignity. This can only be achieved by reducing any attainment gaps between students of all ages and backgrounds. We are committed to equality and diversity, so that all have the chance to realise their potential."

Equality and Diversity impact measures are included annually in the HE Action Plan with attention to the following areas:

- actively promoting equality and diversity among all staff, students, employers, parents and stakeholders
- putting practices in place to make sure that all learners can participate fully in student life
- setting challenging targets for engagement and performance of different student groups
- providing opportunities for all students to give their views on provision

HE provision at Strode College seeks to ensure that equality and diversity are everyday aspects of student life and that all learning and teaching activities provide students with an equal and effective opportunity to achieve. HE staff are always encouraged during regular meetings and training sessions to consider equality and diversity issues in relation to identifying resources, employability and academic support measures.

The close attention paid to equality and diversity issues in the development of Higher Education learning spaces at the College was discussed in 1.4.1 above. Free and open access to resources is also provided to students through the use of Moodle, regular interaction with qualified staff in the LRC and in personal tutorial sessions; this facilitates learning and allows students to participate in higher-level programmes that adequately meet their needs. The broad range of study skills workshops available through the LRC has also supported the diverse spectrum of students and their individual requirements, including helping those mature students returning to study, to do so effectively. Diverse teaching methods increase opportunities for all students and by assisting learners in these different ways, it is hoped that they will derive enjoyment and motivation from their studies and ultimately succeed.

In line with these College policies and objectives, consideration of equality and diversity issues has played an important role in the preparation of the APP with many of the activities planned to address targets being grounded in this ethos. Intended developments in the collation of accurate data, recruitment strategies, personal support and approaches to teaching and learning will put equality and diversity at the forefront in achieving our access and participation objectives. Indeed, whilst in a recent written submission HE students said that *"the College pays very good attention to equality and diversity issues"*, it is nonetheless Strode College's strategic aim to build on the good practice that exists already and drive the equality agenda forward across access, success and progression in the context of this APP.

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2.2 Target groups / Aims and objectives

In the following table, numbers quoted refer to the footnotes found throughout this text, which themselves align fully with the targets included in the accompanying investment plan to identify intended actions for the five-year duration:

Access	PTA_1	Students from low-participation neighbourhoods	Targeted recruitment in towns closest to the College to increase the proportion of students from low-participation neighbourhoods; 2
	PTA_2	Students from households of low socio-economic status	Improving data sources to identify gaps more easily; increase the proportion of students from low socio-economic status households; 3
	PTA_3	Care-leavers	Working with the local authority to improve attainment and progression to HE of care leavers; 10
	PTA_4	Ethnic minorities	Working with the local authority to improve attainment and progression to HE of BAME students; 6
Success + Continuation	PTS_1	Students from low-participation neighbourhoods	Improving continuation rates across all programmes for students from P4Q1 and other underrepresented groups; 1,5,7,8
	PTS_2	Students from low income backgrounds	Developing teaching strategies to improve success rates for students from low income backgrounds and overall; 4
	PTS_3	Mature students	Supportive action for students with difficulties to improve continuation rates across all courses for mature students and others; 1,5,7,8
Progression	PTP_1	Students with disabilities (<i>intersection with mature</i>)	Employability and study advice to ensure younger students with disabilities enjoy as positive progression as more mature learners; 9

3. Strategic measures

3.1 Introduction

In its QRV report, the QAA expressed “confidence” in the academic standards and student experience at Strode College and stated that *‘The College has a close relationship with its awarding body, the University of Plymouth’*. More than a validation arrangement, this is a collaborative partnership based on mutual respect. In association with the University’s supportive team, Strode has grown its HE offer and become involved in a range of different partnership initiatives, including the HEFCE-funded Learning Gain project and regional initiatives backed by the European Social Fund (ESF).

As part of this activity, Strode College has made immense efforts to raise aspirations amongst learners in local schools and to widen access to HE. As a leading player in the regional NNCO project, the College organised conferences, visits and activities aimed at closing the gap for students from low participation neighbourhoods, who were at risk of not reaching recognised attainment levels. This saw the participation of 1,511 students in a single year, gained the gratitude of local Headteachers and was exemplified by a STEM event called ‘Science Sensations’ involving major companies, such as Clarks, EDF Energy and Wyke Farms, as well as various regional universities. The success of this programme led to the University of Plymouth and its collaborative partners being selected to create one of the largest and most influential NCOP projects in the country and Strode College has again featured strongly as ‘Next Steps South West’ (NSSW) has promoted access and participation by delivering core support and targeted activities in schools across the south-west.

NSSW has offered students focused advice and guidance using Careerpivot, e-mentoring, study skills workshops, activities to build confidence and self-esteem and innovative HE resource boxes, as well as sector-specific talent academies and conferences across the region. It has been successful in reaching its target audience and is moving large numbers of young people towards improved knowledge of Higher Education and increased readiness to seize the opportunities it provides. In the context of direct involvement in the regional Outreach Hub that will assume responsibilities from NSSW when NCOP funding comes to an end, Strode College intends to maintain these diverse interventions and expand their positive outcomes through continued collaboration and community engagement in its strategic approach to addressing the issues identified in this APP over the five years of the plan.

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Fresh initiatives to increase Higher Education participation for students from low participation neighbourhoods will include targeted recruitment in the towns closest to the College, as data has shown that this is where such activity is likely to be most productive. The study support, individualised advice and personal development offered by future evolutions of successful NSSW initiatives will prepare young students more effectively for HE and so impact directly on efforts to improve continuation across all programmes. Promoting Strode HE in the direct vicinity of the College and providing appropriate learning skills both before and within HE programmes will, however, not only assist younger applicants, but also those returning to education, as more mature learners are often also in need of such support in order to succeed and perform well on their courses (see **PTA_1; PTS_1/3**).

To reach all the targets outlined above will require a range of activities involving various elements of the local population; however, schools liaison will remain an important aspect of this work. The College enjoys a sustained and productive relationship with schools in our vicinity, having engaged secondary students with specialist enrichment days on themes such as Engineering, Event Management, Language Learning and Digital Design involving university and industry experts. Significant numbers of local primary schools are also members of a successful international partnership led by the College, whilst others have participated in sports events, taken Strode-based apprentices to support their children or benefitted from Mandarin tuition provided through a link with Strode.

The constructive partnership that exists between Strode College and surrounding schools is extended by our work with Somerset County Council on Transition Panels referred to in 1.5 above. Area-wide CEIAG initiatives, major careers fairs and an exciting programme of sector-specific employability opportunities create a diverse collaborative offer to aid progression through secondary and post-16 education and on towards Higher Education. This activity will allow us to intensify our strategic focus on other student groups, such as those with learning difficulties/disabilities, BAME students and care leavers, whilst contributing to an ambitious, locally-based improvement agenda (see **PTA_3/4; PTP_1**).

The ESF project, also being delivered in collaboration with universities and colleges from across the region, has its own pointers to the way Strode College could make an even greater contribution to ensuring equitable access, success and progression over coming years. Arranging breakfast networking meetings and conducting training needs analyses with various local employers will help us to address the immediate skills shortages for SMEs in our area, but will simultaneously allow us to bring more managers and employees from these companies to the realisation that more substantial HE programmes might be the most effective means to professional advancement or the career change they seek. Focusing on businesses in disadvantaged or ethnically diverse areas might assist support for these communities.

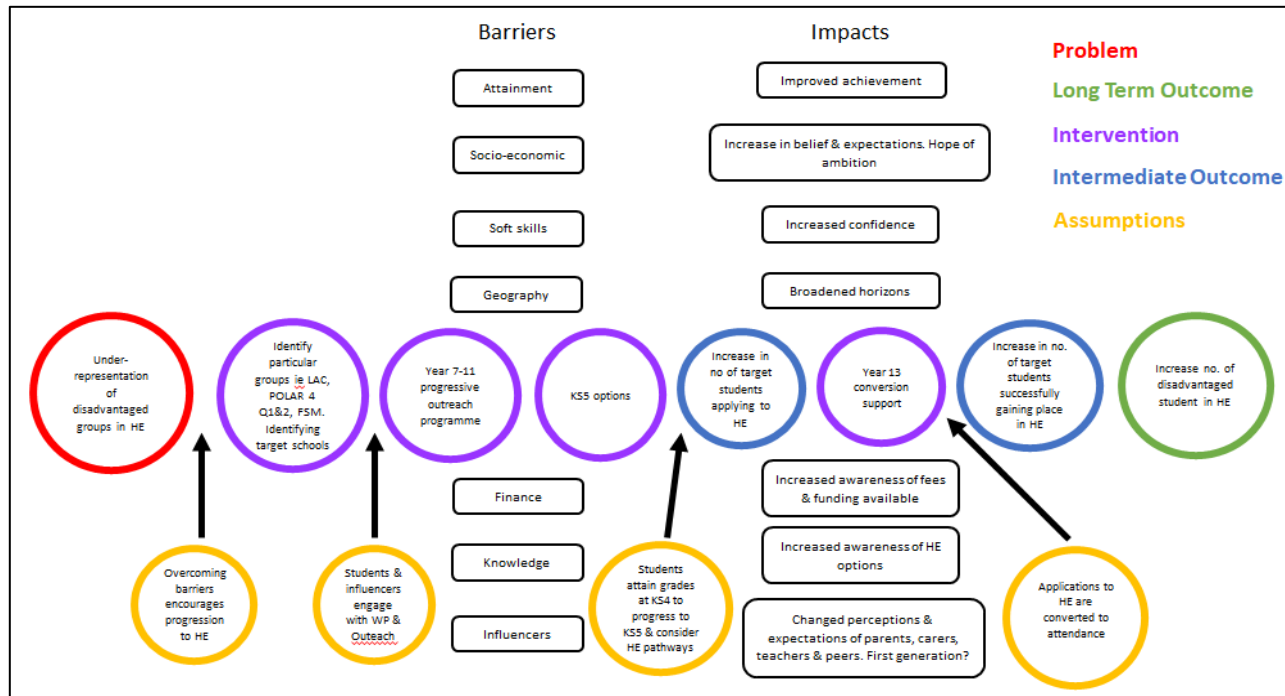
3.2 Whole provider strategic approach

3.2.1 Overview

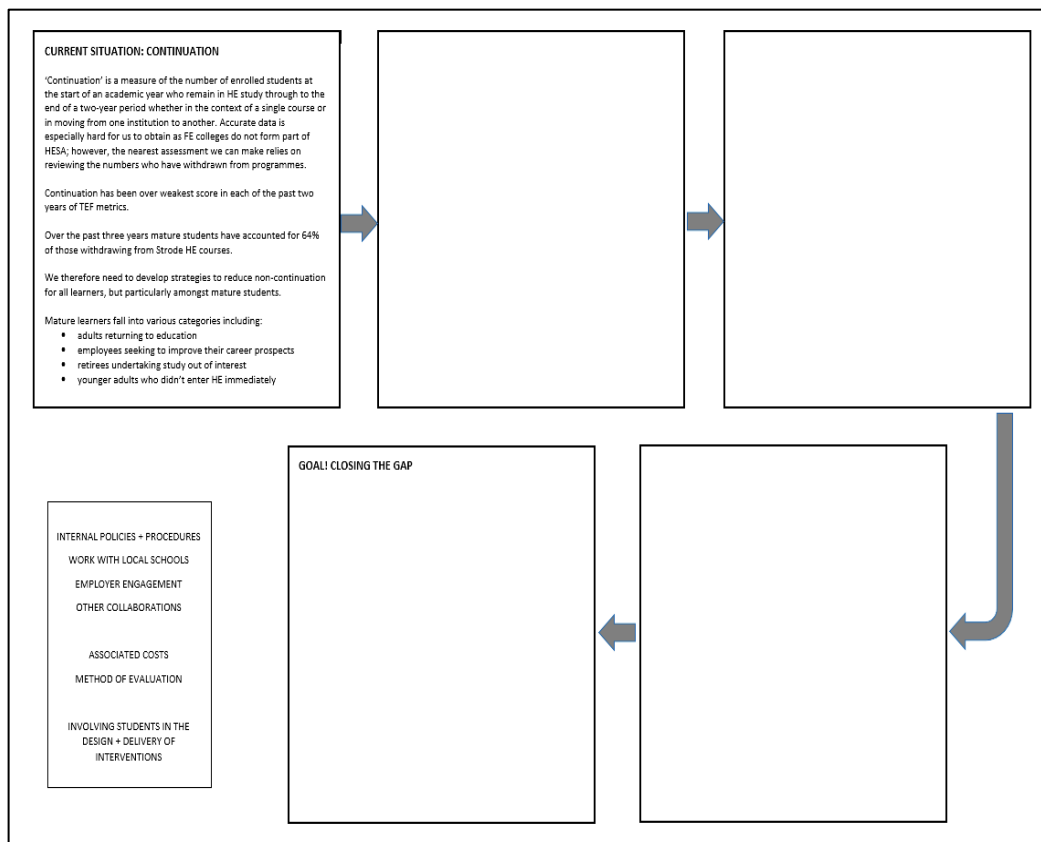
The strategic measures to be implemented over the duration of the APP, with the aim of meeting ambitious objectives for target groups, have been developed and will be constantly reviewed under a theory of change procedure created in association with our HE partners and refined amongst our own staff. As with many aspects of HE professional development undertaken at the College, the theory of change supporting this plan will be scrutinised and tested by students and local business representatives as we build up to delivery of the 2020-25 APP.

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Below is a diagram, developed with partners in the Next Steps SW (NSSW) NCOP programme, which articulates a theory of change applicable in particular to target students in traditionally low participation neighbourhoods.



This schematic identifies activities designed to overcome barriers over a period of time and to have a positive impact on improving identified under-representation towards achieving a target – its format can be used for other strategic goals.



Basing strategic developments at Strode College on the work carried out collaboratively with NSSW, the document shown here was one of several used to gather ideas from mixed groups of HE tutors during a staff training session. This version focuses specifically on the task of improving continuation across all courses, whilst other colleagues discussed the College's approach to improving access, success and progression for other underrepresented groups.

Along with the statistical evidence outlined above, this process has ensured that all Strode HE staff – working on NSSW and teaching on programmes – have had the opportunity to contribute to the identification of APP objectives and the definition of strategic measures to improve performance and close gaps for target students.

3.2.2 Alignment with other strategies

The strategy and activities laid out in this APP align fully with the overarching aims of the College as a whole, as recently updated in the Strode College Strategic Plan 2018-2021. Whilst not covering the entire duration of the APP, the vision articulated in the Strategic Plan of *“Inspiring all to maximise their potential”* is the precise purpose of the APP, as it seeks to ensure that all students can benefit from effective access, success and progression, irrespective of their background.

This vision is set against the College values developed in cohort with all staff and the active contribution of students:

- *Ambitious and have high expectations for our students, staff and College*
- *Professional and conscientious, securing the very best results for our learners*
- *An inclusive and friendly organisation with a clear focus on meeting our wider community needs*
- *Genuine, honest and trusting with a “can do” approach that celebrates achievement and recognises success*

The College’s mission, as expressed in the Strategic Plan, similarly underpins the desire for quality and inclusion by stating Strode’s aim to be *“the region’s first choice for high quality education and training”* and, whilst being applicable to all aspects of College provision, many of the Strategic Goals within the plan have a resonance with APP objectives:

1. *To provide outstanding education and training*
 - at least 95% of students obtain a positive progression or destination outcome
 - achievement rates for all learners will exceed national averages
2. *To offer an inclusive and safe community of learning*
 - ongoing investment into the campus to create modern and innovative learning and social spaces
 - a welcoming place to learn and work that makes sure no groups are disadvantaged
3. *To meet the education and social needs of our learners and wider community*
 - high quality, affordable Higher Education that is responsive to the needs of students and local employers
 - building on the strong relationships with local and regional partners (schools, universities, businesses)
4. *To expand our work with local and national employers*
 - maximise opportunities to enhance the development of key employability skills for all learners, ensuring they are best placed and ready to secure high quality and rewarding jobs, which lead to successful careers

Higher Education is specifically integrated into the majority of College policies, whilst occasionally additional points are included for this particular phase of provision; such is the case for the College’s ‘Teaching and Learning Policy’, in which the ‘*University of Plymouth Teaching & Learning Strategy Themes*’ have been adopted to aid Strode HE development:

- Enterprising
- Internationalised approach
- WP for underrepresented groups
- Learner-centred approach
- Work-based /-related learning
- Exploit new technology
- Research-informed teaching
- Sustainability
- Strengthen partnerships

3.2.3 Strategic measures

The integration of UoP strategic themes into the Strode College Teaching and Learning Policy is significant with respect to securing the continuous improvement in HE provision for identified target groups envisaged by this APP, as high quality learning opportunities and diverse approaches to teaching will ultimately have the greatest influence on the College’s ability to reach its goals. In this regard, it is useful to consider some of the conclusions made in the QRV Report as an independent reflection on Strode HE delivery as it stands currently and on which we seek to build:

- *‘Students highly value the quality of teaching and student support’*
- *‘The College is responsive to staff development needs, e.g. in supporting staff to undertake master’s and research degrees. The team concluded that this considered view of staff development and the consultative approach to course development has helped create a portfolio of Higher Education programmes that are well regarded by students.’*
- *‘The College actively responds to student opinions; e.g. student feedback led to scheduling changes in assignments.’*

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Similar comments have been made by students on numerous occasions in PCMs, HE Forums, written responses to NSS and in the preparation of this APP. They are recorded and used to drive development in the annual HE SAR and Action Plan. In the most recent NSS, students said the following about the teaching they had experienced: *“Excellent level of teaching – teachers are extremely knowledgeable and passionate about their subjects; there is good variety of class activities”*

The strong strategic focus on excellence in teaching and learning combined with the College’s close partnership with Somerset County Council in improving opportunities and reducing gaps for all student groups will be crucial in achieving the ambitious objectives set out in this plan for ethnic minorities and those from low income backgrounds. Included amongst the developments envisaged through this relationship is far greater accuracy in the local data made available regarding student progression and the effectiveness of educational provision for all groups (see **PTA_2/4; PTS_2;**).

Labour market conditions are another area where the local authority, regional business organisations and the LEP are seeking to develop more accurate advice and destination information. This ties in closely with the College’s objective of enhancing employability for all learners, including those following HE programmes, and the University of Plymouth’s concentration on this area of guidance in its own strategic developments. The contact with the National Careers Service, which led to the successful HE Employability Day for HE students at Strode College, was also instigated through these important local relationships (see **PTP_1**).

3.3 Student consultation

Strode College works with all HE learners to enhance the student experience and give everyone a say in the delivery of the teaching programme. Deliberate steps are taken to involve learners directly in the development of provision and students have been thoroughly consulted for each of the new programmes that have been introduced in recent years.

The purpose of such detailed and regular student consultation is to ensure that learners of all backgrounds can access and enjoy their studies and achieve to their fullest potential. To this end, learner voice is also central to the process of monitoring provision and evidence of the effectiveness of this practice was to be found in the QRV report, which said: *‘Students are actively engaged in programme monitoring and have the resources needed to support their learning.’*

Frequent opportunities are provided for students to express their views, such as HE Forum meetings, Joint Boards of Study (JBS) and Programme Committee Meetings (PCM). These PCM discussions, involving student representatives for every year of a programme, are required to be held each semester by the University of Plymouth for all the courses it validates at partner institutions; however, to ensure monitoring processes are effective and uniformly applied, Strode College organises PCMs to engage students on all courses, including HNDs.

Across all courses, representatives are elected to put forward student views and their influence on developments is widely appreciated with both students from various underrepresented groups having been elected to these roles. HE students are also invited to elect a student governor and this influential role is an important element of the student voice procedures that underpin our delivery. Governors are interested in hearing from students about their experiences and also take part in learning walks through HE classrooms to talk with students and inform themselves more closely.

Our HE learners recognise their freedom to share opinions and understand their contribution towards improvements, saying that: *“Issues raised through course reps are always dealt with quickly and efficiently.”* The degree to which students are full and equal partners in College decision-making is also evidenced in the repeatedly expressed opinion that course tutors are approachable at any time to deal with concerns and support achievement.

These consultation processes have been used extensively over the past year to engage with the student body regarding the design, implementation and evaluation of activities in the APP. Also, every HE class – all courses and all levels – was visited during the compilation of the plan so that each student could participate directly in its development. Comments from these discussions helped focus targets by identifying issues, for which confirmatory statistics could be sought.

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Statistical information and the issues deemed as requiring attention were shared with students in the context of OfS priorities and the way these might most effectively be highlighted in the developing APP. The full review of groups and lifecycle stages was available for students to consider at these meetings and remaining sections of the plan made available for students to give their views. Opinions were sought on the range of initiatives and support activities that could be introduced in order to address these areas for improvement and different means of evaluating their success in closing the identified gaps were also discussed. Amendments were made to the text of the APP and the associated targets were made as a result of these valuable conversations, so that the aims articulated in this important document might best represent diverse student opinion.

One specific idea, which arose from suggestions made at HE Forum, was to put out an open invitation to all HE students to take part in individual discussions to be arranged with the Head of HE. The feeling was that students could air their views more openly on issues related to access, success and progression in a less public arena. Students, who ultimately took part in this opportunity, came from all courses, both University of Plymouth and Pearson programmes, and were from a variety of classes at levels 4-6. Reflecting the diverse nature of Strode students, many also belonged to a number of different underrepresented groups and for the majority, younger learners and more mature students alike, no previous family member had ever been to university. The table below shows the proportion of those interviewed belonging to each student category:

Low participation postcode	Low income household	Mature student	Student with disability	Ethnic minority student	First member of family in HE
60%	47%	60%	47%	13%	60%

Below are a series of comments and opinions expressed during these honest and frank conversations:

- *I wanted to better myself and pursue an interest once the children were old enough*
- *I've only ever been able to get admin work, so I wanted the qualification to improve my prospects*
- *Student loans and disability allowance are very complicated and I was grateful for the way it was all explained*
- *From experiences at school, I really doubted my capability; I didn't think I could get a degree – now I know I can!*
- *The welcome from staff when I cautiously came in to enquire was fantastic: "It's never too late...!"*
- *I found out through the theatre mailing list, but there could be more examples of older students on the website*
- *We're very lucky to be studying at Strode; we all love the tutors – they're so approachable and supportive*
- *We really value that we are in the newest, most pleasant area of the College; the HE block is so well laid out*
- *Colleagues recommended Strode for HE when I was volunteering – and it has proved to be a great decision!*
- *It just shows that, even if you don't get the best grades at school, you can still get good qualifications*
- *The breadth and diversity of topics is something I had never encountered before – it's a validating experience!*
- *When you come back to education after a number of years working, you bring relevant knowledge with you*
- *The tutors give great support and advice, but we're not reliant on it; we have self-direction and independence*
- *The personal investigation was a challenge, but one which in the end I believe I rose to*
- *Getting three assignments in on one day was a bit too much; I'd have done better had they been spread out*
- *A little more attention could be paid to those of us with dyslexia – but at least we had the chance to sign up*
- *I was concerned about starting at Strode at the same time as my daughter, but it has turned out well*

The sum of these individual discussions combined with previous consultations throughout the year had a significant influence on the objectives underpinning the Strode College APP. The support available to mature learners in returning to education after many years, the encouragement offered in schools to those from low participation backgrounds or low income families that they do belong in Higher Education and the breadth of learning disabilities that can impact upon success in assessment all emerged from the above comments and became central to the evolving plan. A clear message was also received that recruitment, induction and tutorial need to address concerns such as IT capabilities and student finance on a consistent and ongoing basis. All such developments feature strongly in our ambitions.

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3.4 Evaluation strategy

The aim of this APP is that it should demonstrate how understanding of target groups across the student lifecycle has informed decisions on where to plan interventions; indeed, much of the above concentrates on the investigation from varied sources of the evidence showing where Strode College should focus its developmental attention. It is, however, vital that regular evaluation of activities should take place to achieve the desired overall results.

Developing high quality approaches to evaluation as part of a whole provider strategic approach is crucial when striving for significantly improved outcomes and in order to have confidence that the activities implemented offer the greatest benefit to target groups. All research needs to be conducted with the necessary ethical, safeguarding, legal and risk considerations and effective evaluation commences at the planning stage. Involving the use of statistical, survey and interview tools, a vital part of this process is close reflection on all available information and data, as well as thorough self-assessment of performance and practice against measurable criteria.

Strode College has been successful in developing several new HE programmes in recent years, for which initial and ongoing evaluation has been a critical element. The very rigorous approval process implemented by the University of Plymouth demands full justification of the purpose of all new provision, its relationship to existing courses, both at the University and across the partnership network, and the potential demand from prospective students. Analysis of a wide range of information from different stakeholders and the local community during the development of new courses has led to the academics charged with determining the validity of the application to state that the approval documentation prepared by Strode College has been amongst the most clear and detailed they have reviewed. In Plymouth's opinion, conclusions arrived at have been credible and based in quantitative and qualitative evidence from multiple sources.

This familiarity with evaluative practice has been put to good use in developing the contents of this plan and will also prove invaluable during the implementation of proposed interventions in order to assess whether actions taken are having the desired and anticipated impact on target groups. Whilst assessment of performance and the widest consultation underpins the context of this plan, evaluation of its potential success during delivery will determine how practice can be refined and further improved to eliminate inequality across the student lifecycle. This will involve constant referral to the original aims and objectives of planned activities and robust mechanisms for reflecting on the theory of change as established at the outset and making alterations accordingly.

Evaluation is nonetheless another area where size can have a disproportionate effect on the validity of findings. If statistics can offer mixed messages about the student groups and lifecycle stages most deserving of investment, when based on small cohorts, the same is true about many attempts to evaluate support programmes at a provider level. Students taking part in the 'Science Sensations' event described earlier commented in questionnaires on the inspiration it had given them for continuing on to higher-level study and every Higher Education presentation given by the College in local schools is evaluated similarly; however, extensive evaluation frameworks with control groups and multiple approaches, as proposed in the OfS workshops, is not realistic for small providers with limited capacity. It is, therefore, membership of NSSW that ensures our ability to evaluate programmes and activities with the prescribed thoroughness.

Involvement in NSSW has provided us with direct access to a team of full-time, dedicated evaluation specialists, employed through the University and well versed in developing the appropriate form of narrative, empirical or causal evaluation to assess every activity, event and programme across the region. The first two years of NSSW have been thoroughly reviewed providing a wealth of data about the enthusiasm for specific activities and the degree of student learning. Results have shown that participants from nursery schools to FE colleges have found many events motivational and that the influence on student opinions of Higher Education has been significant. Equally, however, some of the programme's initiatives have been brought to an end prematurely due to insufficient evidence of impact.

Strode College has benefitted substantially from this evaluation support and will continue to do so as the landscape develops over coming years. As a member of the NSSW consortium, the College is already collaborating strategically and operationally with other HE providers across the south-west and the creation of the regional Outreach Hub will allow us to strengthen our existing relationship with employers, local councils, enterprise advisors and the Careers Hub.

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A new, more flexible model of operation also offers partners the opportunity to engage in projects in support of access beyond the immediate remit of NSSW and in doing so to enhance capacity, increase viability and capture best practice. This facility and the external academic engagement it provides will enable Strode to utilise the evaluation expertise that already exists to complement its own experience and deliver on its APP commitments.

At the same time, Strode College has the advantage due to its size of close and direct involvement of the Principal, Deputy Principal with the Head of Higher Education in the review of evaluation findings and the accessibility of both student representatives and governors to share considerations with regularly throughout the development process.

3.5 Monitoring progress against delivery of the plan

As we put this APP into operation, it is of course essential to monitor performance carefully and assess the progress being made towards our strategic goals. Through close analysis of the evidence at our disposal, monitoring becomes the ongoing process to achieve the desired continuous improvement. A diverse range of data and accompanying planning procedures indicate when issues arise and helps to determine the most effective means of addressing them.

The HE SAR and Action Plan is a pivotal tool in the monitoring cycle. All HE programmes and student groups are engaged in its production and it serves throughout the year as a vehicle to determine priorities, guide developments and provide a context for staff training. Closely matched against all chapters and indicators of good practice in the original UK Quality Code, thorough cross-referencing has been undertaken to align it with the revised and updated version. Robust success criteria built into the action plan and a detailed impact statement presented to governors as a precursor to APR serve to assess outcomes and shape future objectives.

The Deputy Principal leads the College's quality assurance processes consisting of detailed data collection and analysis and regular reviews of all areas of the College. For Higher Education, learning walks by both managers and governors combine with peer-to-peer observations allowing colleagues to share scholarship with each other and developmental observations conducted by the Head of HE that determine the focus of team and individual professional training and support annual appraisal. Curriculum and business managers also meet regularly in action groups chaired by the Deputy Principal to review information from these procedures and help decide strategic direction.

Progress towards APP targets is carefully scrutinised by these management groups, as well as by the Governors through APR and termly Academic Standards and Quality committee meetings and directly by the Principal at HE Strategy within senior management discussions. At the same time, developments associated with the APP will be constantly held under review in line management discussions between the Head of HE and the Deputy Principal and at monthly HE Operations meetings with programme leaders for all courses in the company of data, IT, learning resource and marketing managers. Any concerns emerging with regard to securing APP targets can therefore be easily escalated to the highest level.

In addition to the College's effective management structure, the degree to which student consultation and learner voice are an everyday occurrence within Higher Education at Strode has been well documented above. This is the opportunity for the student body in all its diversity to engage with developments on an ongoing basis and, in particular, to monitor achievements in relation to the APP. The open relationship that Strode HE has with its students means that they will quickly raise issues and identify weaknesses, if they determine that insufficient progress is being made towards the plan's objectives. Student representatives will demand that revised actions are implemented to address shortfalls, as well as encouraging greater focus on those areas that have both proven to be successful and met with their approval.

Finally and crucially, there is the rigorous monitoring applied by the University of Plymouth as our validating partner for degrees and foundation degrees and by Pearson in respect of HNC/HNDs. The University's Directorate of Academic Partnerships (AP) holds frequent forum meetings for all partners in Plymouth and appoints a Relationship Development Manager to deal with all quality and developmental issues related to each college's provision. These interactions have an increasing basis in data collection and analysis, as the University evolves its processes to meet OfS requirements and the context of our access and participation plan. The thorough 'AP Periodic Review' that the University of Plymouth conducts with all partner colleges on a cyclical basis will also provide Strode College with a further layer of scrutiny in terms of the APP as it is fortuitously scheduled both in the coming year and again in 2023-24 as the objectives set out in the plan are expected to be well advanced.

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Primary sources used to inform our monitoring and planning process include TEF metrics, as well as one of its main constituent parts, the National Student Survey (NSS). In addition to data regularly being produced about groups both internally and through the University of Plymouth, these respected assessments of quality and student opinion provide us on an annual basis with information to monitor progress. Investigation of outcomes helps to shape our year-on-year improvement strategy and the work we engage in with programme managers, teaching staff and delivery partners. Detailed analysis assists the wide-ranging review mechanisms we have with both the University and Pearson, whilst many of the conclusions reached also have a direct relevance to access, student success and progression.

Alongside NSS, and in addition to our regular student voice procedures, it is ideal that we can seek views from students not falling under the strict NSS remit through a combination of the Pearson Annual Student Survey and Plymouth’s Student Perception Questionnaire (SPQ), the equivalent survey issued by the University for students in the first year of their programmes. In the 2019-20 APP, we included graphical representations of 2017 results for both NSS and SPQ with an accompanying summary of actions.

For this latest plan, as evidence of the effectiveness of monitoring procedures at the College and an indication of the scrutiny that will be applied as we strive to attain our five-year objectives, we present the headline statistics from the analysis of 2018 NSS and SPQ outcomes. An overall HE student satisfaction rating that placed us amongst the leading institutions in the country and a record of improvement and highly ranked performance gave us every reason to feel confident; there is, however, no room for complacency and these welcome statistics simply reinforce our determination to bring rigorous examination to every aspect of our APP in coming years.

Category	NSS (national average = all HEIs)	SPQ (average = University of Plymouth partners)
General observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For all but one sub-category... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - above national average - improved over last year by 7-19% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2017 outcome showed improvement in 36/42 categories/sub-categories • 2018 all well above UoP average
Overall satisfaction	96.1% (12% improvement)	100% (17.4% above average)

All senior managers and governors have been appraised of the changes to be implemented through APP commitments and their positive implications for the College. HE provision at Strode College draws staff from all directorates and a wide variety of academic and vocational teams and all have taken part in professional training sessions specific to the inception of the Office for Students and related HE developments.; there is also an increasing HE presence in discussions at all levels of the organisation and a genuine recognition of its role in meeting the College mission. Gathering genuine student opinions also allows us to feel confident that the College is offering the best possible service and high quality provision to its HE learners. Monitoring is embedded across the organisation, and as the APP articulates Strode College values and reflects its ambitions, ensuring the aims of the plan are achieved is a concern shared by all.

4. Provision of information to students

Details about all Strode HE courses are to be found on the College website, which has undergone significant improvement in the context of ongoing conditions of registration. Clear pathways lead to descriptions of each higher level course and the diverse range of information a prospective student might require, including:

- general advice, online application forms and clearly defined fee structures
- the duration, weighting and credits available for each core and optional module
- approaches to teaching and learning, including the balance of lectures, seminars etc.
- assessment schedules (exams, coursework, practical) to assist students in planning workload
- details of work placement expectations and support with employability
- expectations, including the anticipated independent study time required

Policies of importance to current and prospective students are accessible during the application and enrolment process and throughout teaching programmes, including clear details of tuition fees and overall financial commitments across the entirety of programmes. These figures are available to students via the website and in other publications, such as the Higher Education prospectus, and guaranteed to all learners by the Student Protection Plan. Information is also included about bursaries available to promote access and participation, currently standing at £250 for students on full maintenance loan and £200 for those living 15+ miles from the College; it is, however, our intention to focus this financial support more directly on underrepresented groups in coming years.

All policies related to HE are: i) readily accessible, transparent, unambiguous and written in plain language; ii) clear, accurate and comprehensive; iii) specially developed to align with requirements of partner awarding bodies; iv) regularly reviewed and updated for national developments; Strode College also gives all applicants the HE Student Contract at the point of offer, as well as providing them with the HE Student Charter and the Student Protection Plan making them aware of their rights and the support measures in place. Internet-based guidance is complemented by a full range of published materials, including the HE Prospectus and information leaflets about each course. The QRV report was complimentary about the support offered for HE admissions saying: *'The College has a comprehensive HE admissions policy that details the process applicants will follow. Information for students is easily accessible through a variety of ways and formats, including the College website and HE prospectus. The admissions processes are clear and aligned to both the regulator's expectations and the UK Quality Code'*.

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Summary of 2020-21 entrant course fees

*course type not listed

Inflationary statement:

Subject to the maximum fee limits set out in Regulations we intend to increase fees each year using the RPI-X

Table 4a - Full-time course fee levels for 2020-21 entrants

Full-time course type:	Additional information:	Course fee:
First degree		£6,750
Foundation degree		£6,750
Foundation year/Year 0	*	*
HNC/HND		£6,750
CertHE/DipHE	*	*
Postgraduate ITT	*	*
Accelerated degree	*	*
Sandwich year	*	*
Erasmus and overseas study years	*	*
Other	*	*

Table 4b - Sub-contractual full-time course fee levels for 2020-21 entrants

Sub-contractual full-time course type:	Additional information:	Course fee:
First degree	*	*
Foundation degree	*	*
Foundation year/Year 0	*	*
HNC/HND	*	*
CertHE/DipHE	*	*
Postgraduate ITT	*	*
Accelerated degree	*	*
Sandwich year	*	*
Erasmus and overseas study years	*	*
Other	*	*

Table 4c - Part-time course fee levels for 2020-21 entrants

Part-time course type:	Additional information:	Course fee:
First degree		£3,800
Foundation degree		£3,700
Foundation year/Year 0	*	*
HNC/HND		£3,375
CertHE/DipHE	*	*
Postgraduate ITT	*	*
Accelerated degree	*	*
Sandwich year	*	*
Erasmus and overseas study years	*	*
Other	*	*

Table 4d - Sub-contractual part-time course fee levels for 2020-21 entrants

Sub-contractual part-time course type:	Additional information:	Course fee:
First degree	*	*
Foundation degree	*	*
Foundation year/Year 0	*	*
HNC/HND	*	*
CertHE/DipHE	*	*
Postgraduate ITT	*	*
Accelerated degree	*	*
Sandwich year	*	*
Erasmus and overseas study years	*	*
Other	*	*

Targets and investment plan 2020-21 to 2024-25

Provider name: Strode College

Provider UKPRN: 10006378

Investment summary

The OfS requires providers to report on their planned investment in access, financial support and research and evaluation in their access and participation plan. The OfS does not require providers to report on investment in student success and progression in the access and participation plans and therefore investment in these areas is not recorded here.

Note about the data:

The investment forecasts below in access, financial support and research and evaluation does not represent not the total amount spent by providers in these areas. It is the additional amount that providers have committed following the introduction of variable fees in 2006-07. The OfS does not require providers to report on investment in success and progression and therefore investment in these areas is not represented.

The figures below are not comparable to previous access and participation plans or access agreements as data published in previous years does not reflect latest provider projections on student numbers.

Table 4a - Investment summary (£)

Access and participation plan investment summary (£)	Academic year				
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Total access activity investment (£)	£4,500.00	£5,250.00	£5,250.00	£6,000.00	£6,000.00
Access (pre-16)	£1,500.00	£1,750.00	£1,750.00	£2,000.00	£2,000.00
Access (post-16)	£1,500.00	£1,750.00	£1,750.00	£2,000.00	£2,000.00
Access (adults and the community)	£1,500.00	£1,750.00	£1,750.00	£2,000.00	£2,000.00
Access (other)	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Financial support (£)	£8,000.00	£8,000.00	£8,500.00	£8,500.00	£9,500.00
Research and evaluation (£)	£4,500.00	£4,750.00	£5,000.00	£5,000.00	£5,000.00

Table 4b - Investment summary (HF1%)

Access and participation plan investment summary (%HF1)	Academic year				
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Higher fee income (£HF1)	£70,785.00	£74,295.00	£77,805.00	£81,315.00	£85,410.00
Access investment	6.4%	7.1%	6.7%	7.4%	7.0%
Financial support	11.3%	10.8%	10.9%	10.5%	11.1%
Research and evaluation	6.4%	6.4%	6.4%	6.1%	5.9%
Total investment (as %HF1)	24.0%	24.2%	24.1%	24.0%	24.0%

